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DEFINING THE DECADE: MUSIC

FRANCOPHONE stars are hidden in plain view within Anglo-American pop hegemony

Different and diverse

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Reviewing my listening highlights from the first 10 years of the millennium over two weeks or so has been a glorious experience, because the process reminded me of just how strong – and different – francophone popular music is, hidden in plain view within the Anglo-American pop hegemony. In a decade rich in diversity, what better place to start than with, in my view, the artist of the decade.

Arthur H matches impeccable taste with daring, and is, in Juan Rodriguez's view, the artist of the decade.

Arthur H: Adieu Tristesse (Polydor, 2005). Created equally in Paris and Montreal, this album spotlighted the man with the nicotine voice and musically universal sensibilities as the most polyvalent and cosmopolitan singer-songwriter-pianist around, no matter what language. (Yup, I'm a huge fan.) He was also among the most prolific, with six album releases over the decade (including Piano Solo and Showtime recorded at the beloved old Spectrum), each exploring different musical terrain, bonded by a keen catholic contemporary intelligence of the language of music. The man matches impeccable taste with daring.

Whether it's a cool dance of transient romance set to Satie (cooing with Feist), an evocation of the San Francisco Gold Rush, a paean to a ballet dancer, a reconciliation with his father (post-1968 star Jacques Higelin), a spoof on the plots of Westerns (with M), trans-country pop-comic fantasies, the lighter-than-being *Le baiser de la lune* ("Love me to the end of the moon"), or an ode to New York City, or the title song, an calm ode to happiness in turbulent times, Arthur is a master of atmospheres, picking up where Serge Gainsbourg left off and informing it with a more ecstatic eclecticism.

Working with guitarist-sampler comrade Nicolas Repac (who issued 2004's delightful Swing Swing) and Montreal brainiac producer Jean Massicotte, he's got so much happening musically that the language barrier disappears (accented in his 2009 sampler Amours, Delice & Ecstasy). Adieu Tristesse was his breakthrough; his studio follow-up L'Homme du monde (2008) won a Victoire award as best pop-rock album. He is that, exactement, a man of the world, bent on cultivating non-French audiences (in Brazil, China, the United States) by creating a language and musical blend of his own. Along with Pour Madame X (2000), Negresse blanche (2003), Arthur H proved himself a master artiste revisiting and expanding on pop mythologies.

Alain Bashung: L'imprudence (Barclay, 2002). Brooding, magisterial, très noir (at times terrifying), and as fully realized an existential concept album as Sinatra's 1955 opus In the Wee Small Hours. Brilliant production (lush strings, pointillist guitars by Marc Ribot and Arto Lindsay, nuance-filled keyboards and percussions) complements the most dramatic voice in French pop. (Eat your heart out, Scott Walker!) His death of cancer last February was a huge loss, for Bashung was at the top of his – and modern French chanson's – form.

WD-40: Saint-Panache (Papa Richard, 2006). Poignant and powerful, keynoted by brilliant singer-songwriter Alexandre Jones and his guitarist brother Etienne "Ti-Loup" Carrier, this pungently perfect synthesis of country and rock gallops along like there's no tomorrow. Jones finds poetry in low-down places, urban and country.

Urbain Desbois: Entomologie (La Tribu, 2003). Of all Québécois artists, Desbois best locates the absurdist element in life; self-deprecating yet tender, clever (wacky metaphors) but pithy, this album got him out of the underground to put a smile on our faces ("Je suis triste / Comme le Canal 10"). Purely humanist and heartrending.

Malajube, Labyrinthes (Dare to Care, 2009). Their third album builds on Trompe l'oeil, an enormously influential how-to-rock-en-français album. A din of noisy and hooks galore, lyrics buried in sound give these road-warriors an international audience.

Loco Locass: Amour Oral (Audiogram, 2004). Notre rappeurs national offer the most critical political album of the decade, supported by imaginative musical values. What do (many) Québécois want? Listen up.

Pierre Lapointe: La forêt des malaimés (Audiogram, 2006). A huge breakthrough for the Quebec scene from this avant-gardiste pop-rock chansonnier, who racked up major sales with music as catchy as ambitious and sophisticated.

Jean Leloup: Mille excuses Milady (Rai Ponpon, 2009). The supreme iconoclast of Quebec rock delivers both freedom and pop hooks, a sense of liberty that's both disquieting and easy to imbibe. Relaxed rococo groove-based guitar playing welds 17 songs programmed almost like a long suite. His best album.

Jacques Dutron: Madame L'Existence (Columbia, 2003). The veteran singer and actor, who started in the yé-yé '60s, with an album for our decade and the ages: many songs sharply political, some wistful, all a deconstruction of classic French chanson with contemporary arrangements.

Bernard Falaise: Clic (2008). The guitarist was the decade's MVP from the city's vital avant-garde and musique actuel scenes, with ventures into pop (producing Marie-Jo Thério, key sessions with Urbain Desbois), jazz-rock (Les Projectionnistes) and rock (prog-rocking Mirodor, Klaxon Gueule). Clic is a series of miniature improvs (by luminaries like Jean Derome, Lori Freedman) that he manipulates into accessible structures. An inspired stroke of genius.

Honorable Mentions: Isabelle Boulay, Chansons pour des mois d'hiver (2000); Les Breastfeeders, Les Matins de grand soirs (2006); Call Me Poupée, Western Shangai (2007); Christophe, Aimer ce que nous Sommes (2008); Contraction, Live 1974 (2000); Karkwa, Le Volume du vent (2008); Anik Jean, Le ciel saigne le martyre (2008); Jérôme Minière, Petit Cosmonaute (2002); Yann Perreau, Western Romance (2002); Stefie Shock, Le Décor (2003); Les Supremes Dindes, La Ruche (2004).

Decade's best: Arcade Fire, Dylan, Patty Griffin

T'Cha Dunlevy:

1. Arcade Fire: Funeral (Merge, 2005). All hype aside, this really was the most enthralling, emotionally engaging, passionate album I heard this decade.

2. Radiohead: Kid A (Parlophone/EMI, 2000). No band captured millennial malaise like Thom Yorke and co. on this lush, devastating electronic-rock romp.

3. M.I.A.: Arular (XL/Beggars, 2005). Electro, dancehall, hip-hop and pop collided in the righteous, ridiculously infectious political party jams of this Sri Lankan-British bombshell's debut.

4. The Dears: No Cities Left (MapleMusic, 2004). Murray Lightburn's songwriting is breathtaking, the arrangements astounding on this Montreal band's pop-noir masterpiece.

5. Jay-Z: The Blueprint (Island Def Jam, 2001). The title says it all; there was not a more assured, economical, eloquent rap statement made this decade.

6. Rilo Kiley: Under the Blacklight (Warner, 2007). L.A. country-rockers crossed over and made the catchiest batch of songs of their career. Still waiting for the follow-up.

7. Sade: Lovers Rock (Sony BMG, 2000). The queen of understated soul is not exactly prolific – the followup to this 2000 gem comes out in February – but she doesn't miss her mark.

8. Justin Timberlake: Futuresex/Lovesounds (Zomba, 2006). Cutting-edge beats and candy-coated hooks collided on this club-land R&B classic.

9. Beirut: The Flying Cub Cup (Ba Da Bing!, 2007). Zac Condon's road-weary, old-world anthems fill the heart with romance and urges to drink wine in the streets of faraway cities.

10. Kanye West: The College Dropout (Roc-A-Fella, 2004). West's recent creative brilliance of his 2004 debut – a personal, humorous and musically adventurous coming-out party.

Bernard Perusse:

1. Bob Dylan: Love and Theft (Columbia, 2001). He's barely made a wrong move in the past decade, but this was the wittiest and most musical album His Bobness gave us in rock's most impressive late-career resurgence.

2. Brian Wilson: Smile (Nonesuch, 2004). In a career defined by pop masterpieces, this lost album – resurrected almost 40 years after its abandonment – is the chief Beach Boy's finest hour.

3. Scott Walker: The Drift (4AD, 2006). No "songs," per se. No melodies. Just nightmare-inducing soundscapes with upsetting aural motifs and lyrics you struggle to forget. In other words, Scott at his best.

4. The White Stripes: White Blood Cells (V2, 2001). This was Jack White's moment of perfection – a raw, essential mission statement. He hasn't improved on it – yet – but even if he never does, we'll play this forever.

5. Robert Plant and Alison Krauss: Raising Sand (Rounder, 2007). The rock god and country princess weaved harmonic magic and proved that the sum can be even greater than its formidable parts.

6. Nick Lowe: At My Age (Yep Roc, 2007). How inspiring is it to see a veteran rocker whose senses of songcraft and humour just get keener as he gets older?

7. Fleet Foxes: Fleet Foxes (Sub Pop, 2008). This haunting chamber-pop stunner was the perfect rebuttal to those who argue that the best days of pop music are behind us. A masterful debut.

8. Ry Cooder: Chaves Ravine (Nonesuch/ Perro Verde, 2005). Cooder and some East L.A. legends produced a magnificent song cycle about life in the hillop barrio that was ultimately levelled to make room for Dodger Stadium.

9. James Hunter: People Gonna Talk (Rounder, 2006). The restless spirits of Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson must have been at peace when these instant classics introduced a new fan base to the simple verities of sweet soul music.

10. Sufjan Stevens: Illinois (Asthmatic Kitty, 2005). This refreshing, daring and wonderfully anarchic tribute to the Prairie State brought a higher profile to a major creative voice.

Jordan Zivitz:

1. Patty Griffin: Impossible Dream (ATO, 2004). The greatest (and most underrated) American songwriter of the last 15 years finds strength in tears. The warm country/folk laments on her most melancholy album were lifelines to anyone drowning in sorrow.

2. Lisa Germano: Lullaby for Liquid Pig (Ineffable; re-released on Young God; 2003). More of a whisperer than a singer, Germano reached her otherworldly peak with this waking dream of an album – a shape-shifting collection haunted by lyrical and sonic spectres.

3. Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds: Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus (Anti-/Epitaph, 2004). By turns devotional and rabid, sacred and profane, Cave's fat-free double album was an unholy bible that collected the obsessions of a lifetime.

4. Wilco: Yankee Hotel Foxtrot (Nonesuch, 2002). The art-vs.-commerce backstory seemed vital at the time, but not as vital as the distorted dispatches from Jeff Tweedy's puzzle-master mind.

5. Damien Rice: O (Vector/Warner, 2003). An intensely intimate debut whose confessionals were nonetheless universal. Rice's inner fire was familiar to anyone with a lovesick romantic's soul.

6. Antony and the Johnsons: I Am a Bird Now (Secretly Canadian, 2005). A trembling falsetto akin to a perpetual sob; tenderly orchestrated elegies of identity confusion and profound love – nobody else sounds like Antony or tells his stories.

7. Okkervil River: Black Sheep Boy (Jagjaguwar, 2005). Will Sheff's devil-may-care vocals and ferociously literate lyrics overflow with howls from the heart, nowhere more so than in the dark fantasyland of Okkervil River's breakthrough album.

8. Muse: Absolution (Warner, 2004). Several years after the cataclysm-free birth of the millennium, Muse's apocalyptic fervour brought the end of days back to our doorstep. Sensational drama from a band that isn't afraid to charge straight over the top.

9. TV on the Radio: Return to Cookie Mountain (Interscope/Universal, 2006). Funk-rock-soul-metal-etc. – there aren't enough hyphens in the world to do justice to the Brooklyn explorers' gleeful blurring of genre boundaries.

10. Primal Scream: XTRMNTR (Creation/Epic/Sony, 2000). The druggy Screamers submerged their groove under tidal waves of brutal electro-rock and intense paranoia. Terrifying at even a low volume.

THE REST OF THE BEST
Check out additional best-of-the-decade picks from T'Cha Dunlevy and Jordan Zivitz at montrealgazette.com/music

Hockey star scores with ring

Mary J. Blige lays a season's beating

DOUG CAMILLI

Some Christmas it must have been in **Mary J. Blige's** household, after she hauled off and smacked hubby **Kendu Isaacs** right in the face with her fist, at her record release party at some New York club the other night.

Accusing him of flirting with a waitress, she shouted, "You're not going to ruin my night," says the N.Y. Post. Then she whacked him, drawing blood, and yelled "What are you gonna do, Chris Brown me?"

Their bodyguards separated them. Isaacs was, uhh, escorted to the door. Blige left separately a few minutes later.

Her PR person issued the lamest non-denial denial ever: "People lie and don't know what they're talking about."

Ottawa Senator hockey player **Mike Fisher** and country singer **Carrie Underwood**, newly engaged, had a nicer Christmas, I guess. But I hope she didn't sprain her finger with the size of the rock he gave her: People mag found some expert to say that the ring she's been flashing around looks like about five carats, worth maybe $150,000 US.

Really, hockey players are overpaid!

Quote of the day: Courtney Love manages to sound like a normal parent, just for a second, on spinner.ca, saying that she "just worshipped" her daughter **Frances Bean** when she was "a little dainty, beautiful baby ... but now she's at an age where we fight, where sometimes she hates me, sometimes I get really mad at her. It's like, 'Oh you must be a bad mother.' No, I'm not a bad mother. I'm a very good mother."

Nicole Kidman is in trouble with the neighbours of her Bunya Hill estate southwest of Sydney in her native Australia.

Her offence? She planted 130 Leyland cypress saplings. They're about 1.5 metres tall already, these things, and can grow to 20 metres. If that's not enough, she has also put up a green nylon fence, and some berms – you know, long mounds of earth.

The locals resent that she's kind of turning the place into a fortress, and are saying so, loudly. Nic usually lives in Nashville now, but has been in Sydney the last little while.

Why am I not surprised by this report that **Ronnie Wood**'s girlfriend **Ekaterina Ivanova** was two-timing him with a young male model?

The Daily Mail had the story about Ekaterina and **Dan Turner**, now openly a couple since she and the Rolling Stone split up. Turner also runs a trendy club called Cannibal.

The same paper has an unnamed source saying that Ivanova "has been bragging 'I've already made £50,000 out of him' thanks to her magazine deals and interviews."

She's 21. Turner is 22. Wood is 61, the silly old fool.

Model **Lara Stone**, newly named as the face of Louis Vuitton gear, is 5-foot 10 and a size four, and she complains – to Vogue mag – that she's almost too chubby to model: "What they say is 'curvy,' but you know they mean 'fat' ... but when I look in the mirror, that's not what I see."

camilli@
thegazette.canwest.com

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